

Holy Places in Kazakhstan

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ABSTRACT The Kazakh people maintained the religious rites of their ancestors for a long time. Ancient beliefs and various cults formed the basis for tengrianism and shamanism. The cult for ritual worship of ancestral spirits (the cult of saints) was equally important. Respect for the dead brought about systematic and regular visits to a pilgrimage and to the burial site. These places are named Holy Places. The goal of this paper is to research the role of holy places in the revival of Folk Islam in Kazakhstan. Usually, the Kazakhs go to the graves of their ancestors every year because this trip is of benefit to the participants' ancestors, which can help their descendants. The symbiosis formed from two traditions, the cult of the ancestors of the nomads plus the Sufi tradition of honoring teachers in Kazakhstan. Thus, a trip to the Saint Places implies a revival of the Folk Islam of Kazakhs.

INTRODUCTION

Kazakhstan is the country, which is situated in Central Asia. More than sixty percent of the territory is a steppe. Therefore, the autochthonous population was engaged in nomadic cattle breeding from the first millennium BC. Although, nomads are polytheists, they are mainly addressed to the God of Heaven (“*Taniry*”). This trait was characteristic of all the nomads of Eurasia, not only for Kazakhs.

Natural climatic conditions (nomadic mode of production, arid steppes) have developed a special nomads “of the steppe etiquette”. For example, once in twelve years, the loss of cattle took place in the Kazakh steppe. Nomads called this case “*Zhut*”. According to the steppe etiquette, common people appealed for help to the Khan, and Khan was obliged to allocate a portion of his livestock free of charge. In those difficult years, Khan could donate up to fifty percent of his herd. Also, in the Kazakh steppe hospitality has been developed greatly. If a stranger called at any village, the owners welcomed him, cut and cooked sheep and provided accommodation. All of this was free, because such was the law, which was common to all. Mythical Alash Khan bequeathed all nomads, that one fourth of the herd belongs to a guest, so the Kazakhs never spared anything for the guests, as they know that they will have the same hospitality. “*Kosh* (bye), they cried as we moved away, many of them riding a few miles with us to see us go safe-

ly on our road. In addition to other aims our visit accomplished, it established our position forever as the trusted friends of the Kirghiz, and this was worth all the trouble that it cost us” (Fell 2013). Gerontocracy is one of the features of a nomadic society. The reason is that after the Turkic khanate, nomads have lost the script and passed to the oral history. After his death, the most respected elders were considered saints and pilgrims went to their graves, turning to them for help. The people believed that their places of burial places have a special energy, and a visit to these places has a beneficial effect on health and other spheres of life. In addition, the most respected and influential elders after their death, became the defenders of a particular locality, region. These places people called Holy Places. This can be seen in the daily life of the Kazakhs. Of course, a lot of people now go to Mecca for pilgrimage, but the majority of Kazakhs Turkestan, other burial place of the great warriors called little Hajj, they go to caravans, sacrifice, and spend the night worshipping spirits. Kazakhs sought to bury the person in his family cemetery near their relatives and ancestors. With the spread of Islam, family cemeteries began to concentrate around the major Muslim holy places.

Nomads believe that people have a soul (“*zhan*”) after death, when the soul loses a body, it is called “*aruak*”. For instance, kazakhs call a darling person “*zhanyim*”, it means your soul is the second part of my soul. According to Kazakhs folk beliefs, “*aruaks*” are among the living

people, they can see everything, except a sex (FM 2005). The basis of the cult of the ancestors is to educate on the immortality of the soul, belief in the afterlife souls of the dead, who are interested in family life and have an impact in their affairs. The wellbeing of “*aruaks*” in his world depended on how relatives performed rituals of commemoration. “*Aruaks*” come to the house on Thursday and leave on Friday. So, once a week, nomads in the past cooked a “*shelpek*” (funeral cakes) for Thursday’s dinner (or Friday’s lunch) and did “*Duga*” (pray to the “*Taniry*”) for their ancestors. According to nomad’s folk beliefs, “*aruaks*” feed on and smell cakes, which are fried in butter (FM 2005). All Eurasian nomads had an ancestor cult (Potapov 1991; Syzranov 2006; Khomushku 2009; Mustafina 2010; Tsydenov 2011) when Sufi brought Islam into Kazakhstan’s steppe. Therefore, Kazakh ancestors accepted the Sufi tradition (the saints cult), and these two traditions were symbiotic, referred to as Folk Islam, Kazakh Islam or Sufi Islam. People believed in the healing power of the holy places. This is not only characteristic of nomads (Ogydin 2002). For instance, Hammerschlag (2009) spent the night in the sacred cave of the Huichol Indians when treating their children. According to the nomadic tradition, each region has burials of Five Saint “*Ata*” (grandfather).

Kazakhs kept this nomadic tradition till the year 1917, then until 1991, Kazakhstan was one of the 15th Soviet Union’s Republics. It was an era of atheism, people hid the fact that they believe in God. According to Mustafina (2010), in those times, people could not make the pilgrimage to Mecca and all people from Central Asia began coming to the Turkestan city (southern Kazakhstan). Two Muslim saints have been buried in this city—Arystan Baba and Kozha Ahmed Yassau. When the USSR collapsed, people could show that they believe in God. Also, there were many new spiritual trends (Sarsambekova et al. 2015).

Objective

The study’s authors aim to study the role of the Holy Places in the process of revival of the traditional religions in Kazakhstan.

METHODOLOGY

Experimental data is based on 10 years of exploration of the Holy Places. Despite the fact

that “AtaZhol” appeared in 1997, the authors of one acquainted with this course in 2005. The first public reaction to “AtaZhol” was negative, because people perceive them to be a religious sect. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in Kazakhstan, as in other post-Soviet republics there were many representatives of various religious organizations. Over time, the hype surrounding “AtaZhol” has passed, and people have realized that it does not bear for anything wrong. According to the authors, the work being done by “AtaZhol” is a revival of popular Islam, which was on the territory of Kazakhstan prior to the 1917 revolution. In this connection, the authors began to communicate with the “AtaZhol” and the researchers received baht (blessing of the saints), were treated in doctors’ AtaZhol, visited the holy places of Kazakhstan. Also, one of the authors was the neophyte of the organization. Authors have used a participant observe method and an emic approach method. Researchers live in the community with shamans, their clients and audience in Astana and Kokshetau (Kazakhstan). At the present time, “Ata Zhol” extended the impact on the territory of Western Siberia (Russia). His departments are in the cities of Omsk, Tyumen, Kurgan and Gorno-Altai (Kalshabayeva et al. 2016).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The veneration of saints is closely linked to pre-Islamic traditions of the Kazakhs. Ancient beliefs, for example, the cult of caves. Southern Kazakhstan was considered as the sacred cave Chakpak-ata. Women came to pray concerning in fertility. Related groups were found among the founders of Kazakh saints. In South Kazakhstan region and in today revered graves, Batyr Baydabek-ata and his wise wife, Domalak Ana, from his son, which according to legend, went to Kazakh tribes Alban, Suan and Dulat.

As authors wrote, Kazakhstan has many new spiritual trends and shamans after collapse of the USSR (Penkala-Gawêcka 2014). One of them is “*Ata Zhol*”, which was established by Kydyrali Mombayuly Tarybaev in the year 1997 (Sarsambekova et al. 2015; Kalshabayeva et al. 2016). Specialized Interdistrict Economic Court of Almaty on February 5, 2009 declared “*Ata Zhol*” is harmful to the health of the population of Kazakhstan (Information about the illegal religious organizations in the Republic of Kazakhstan – 23.11.2012).

This spiritual trend has shamans (“*sunkar*” or men and “*akku*” or women), which undergo three activities. They give a “*bata*” (it is blessing from Kazakhs saint “*aruak*”) to the person. Appearing ancestors in Kazakhstan are not unique. This process was in Mongolia for vengeful ancestors and in Korea for tearful ancestors (Buyandelgeriyn 2007; Kendall 2008). In Kazakhstan, authors have met with Kazakh’s saint person, which have really disappointed their descendants. They have been trying to return their descendants to the right way or “*Ata Zhol*” (FM 2014). Prior to the year 1917, Kazakhs neither drank alcohol nor smoke, they were Muslims. Currently, Kazakhs have forgotten their ancestor’s testament and “gone astray”. They heal people. Shamans go around the person clockwise with “*Ata Tayak*” or dervish’s stick and repeat Kalim, “There is no God except Allah and Muhammad is his prophet”. It is similar with Sufi and Muslim traditions (Basilov 1984; Syzranov 2010; Mirdal 2012). Also, they bring groups of pilgrims to the holy places (regional and Turkestan). The third part of *akkus*’s and *sunkars*’s work is to organize pilgrim groups and lead them to the Holy Places. As they have said, “*keruen aparuga*” (to bring caravan) (FM 2014). In the researchers’ opinion, this case is a good example of “Folk Islam”.

Do people undergo the trip? It depends on their wishes. According to the Folk faiths, all people have to go to the saint mausoleums every year. This tour will grant luck and “unblock the way”. The larger part of pilgrims undergo the trip because they are suffering and they are very dissatisfied with alternative therapies. The authors’ group has had 15 people. 11 people have had a sickness, 1 person has been an author of this article, and 3 people have under gone this trip within 8 years (they have said this trip has changed their lives) (FM 2014a).

“*Ata Zholy’s*” shamans (“*akku*” and “*sunkars*”) say to the audience that the travel to Holy Places is a very successful for their antecedent. As researchers earlier wrote, on the trip, members attend burial places of saints and pray to God there. Each burial always keeps “*shirakshi*” (a person who specially guards of this place and survives on pilgrim’s charity). “*Shirakshi*” pronounces the Holy Quran and “*Duga*” (pray for this saint). Holy Places do not only see participators, but their forefathers (“*aruaks*” or spirits) too. A saintly spirit is believed to be situated

near God and can plead God for the participant’s forefathers and God will push up their spirits (“*aruaks*”) higher. Also, God allows some souls go out of shadow to light. Thus, participator’s forefathers (“*aruaks*”) can take wing to God!

In the opinion of Kazakhs, each person is accompanied by 7 fathers’ and 7 mothers’ ancestors. These ancestors support right (father’s) and left (mother’s) hands at all time. But each Kazakh has to do Muslim ablution, because ancestors are pure and cannot touch their dirty descendants. So, if Kazakhs would like to get support from their ancestors, they would have to do Muslim ablution (Sarsambekova 2015). When a person dies, 7-9 persons lave his/her body (Muslim ablution) so, “*aruaks*” are clean. Women should not have children without the “*neke*” (wedding ceremony, which consist of Muslim and Kazakh customs). During the wedding ceremony, a contract is signed by all members of the family (“*aruaks*” too), not just the bride and groom. When women give birth to their children outside marriage, their children will never get support from the deceased’s ancestors. In the future, this person cannot partake in anything, because his/her way will be blocked (Kazakhs say “*holzhok*”) (FM 2005).

Every week, Kazakh women are obliged to fry a “*shelpek*” (funeral cakes) for Thursday’s dinner (or Friday’s lunch) and read Koran, “*Duga*” for their ancestors. According to popular belief, the souls of dead ancestors (“*aruaks*”) come to the house on Thursday afternoon and leave on Friday afternoon, so they are close to their descendants for one day. Dead ancestors eat the smell of fried tortillas in oil. On Thursday and Friday, the women cannot get out of the house, wash clothes, because the souls of dead ancestors are clean and you can not do them dirty. People ‘feed’ “*aruaks*” and pray for them. These actions help “*aruaks*” become closer to God. In turn, “*aruaks*” help their children and ‘open the way for them’. An individual can realize his plans and dreams. In this case, authors can also see the symbiosis of folk beliefs and Islam. Muslims have been cooking funeral cakes within the 40 days because they believe in à Day of Judgment and the end of the world. All the dead will rise from their graves and put “*shelpek*” on their heads, because the sun will be very light. Also, people do not wash their stuff on Thursday and Friday, as they believe that the dirty water is poured on the pure “*aruaks*”.

Also, “*Ata Zhol’s*” shamans bring to the trip not only Muslims and Kazakhs. Researchers have seen people from Russia on the trip (Russians, Tatars, Bashkirs, Russian Kazakhs) and from Kazakhstan (Kazakhs, Kazakhstan’s Russian, Kazakhstan’s Tatars). “*Akkus*” and “*Sunkars*” have talked about pilgrims from Germany, but researchers could not see them. Authors have kept in touch with Arman (Sarsambekova 2015; Kalshabayeva et al. 2016), he has said that this trip to the Holy places has helped him. He has been living according to the instructions of “*Ata Zhol’s*” shamans. He has been doing Muslim ablution every morning (after wake up) and every evening (before go to the bed), he has also been going to the mosque, and his wife has been cooking “*shelpek*” every Thursday for dinner, where Arman has been reading the Holy Quran and “*Duga*” for his ancestors. Scientists wrote about the healing properties of the Holy Quran in the treatment (Mahjoob et al. 2014; Henry 2015). Thus, according to the opinion of “*Ata Zhol’s*” shamans, this trip is of benefit to participants’ ancestors, which can help their descendants, thereby, giving them support.

CONCLUSION

On the anniversary, the Kazakhs shot to visit the burials of their ancestors. In the Kazakh steppe, the two traditions were united together of the Sufi tradition of honoring the saints and the nomadic cult of ancestors. So, this trip is a restoration of Folk Islam of Kazakhs and Sufi Islam, which includes Islam and nomadic Ancestors cult.

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